



Representation of Race: A Derridean Analysis of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract— This study revisits the question of race in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and challenges the long-standing view that the novel is inherently anti-racist. Racism is approached here as both personal prejudice and systemic discrimination rooted in perceived racial and ethnic differences, most often directed at marginalized groups. While some scholars regard racism as an innate human tendency, others understand it as socially produced and sustained by cultural and institutional forces. Although *Huckleberry Finn* is widely celebrated for its apparent critique of slavery and racial injustice, this study reconsiders such claims by asking whether Twain truly opposed slavery or simply represented its cruelty for narrative effect. It also questions whether his depiction of enslaved characters fully escapes racial bias and stereotyping. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of "double reading," the analysis uncovers tensions and contradictions within the novel's racial representations. Through content analysis and a descriptive-analytical approach, the study ultimately suggests that Twain's portrayal of both enslaved people and slaveholders remains unresolved in its stance toward racial objectivity and resistance to bias.



Keywords— Conscious, Deconstruction, Double Reading, Jacques Derrida, Mark Twain, Racism

I. INTRODUCTION

Racism, as a belief system, is regarded as one of the persistent phenomena present in both small and large communities worldwide. Some scholars argue that racism is innate and that every human harbors racist views to some extent. Conversely, other researchers argue that racism is not inherent but rather learned from societal norms and structures. In both perspectives, racism functions to divide people into categories based on religion, sect, skin color, region, gender, biological features, and racial characteristics.

The term *race* is widely employed across all layers of society, including institutions and systems such as politics, economics, and the legal framework. These institutions

often work collectively to reinforce and perpetuate various forms of discrimination and inequality against certain groups. Such systemic discrimination, embedded within institutional structures and societal practices, has contributed to the widespread notion that some races are inherently superior to others.

Mark Twain is recognized as an American humorist, novelist, and travel writer. He is best remembered today as the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and is widely considered one of the greatest American writers of all time. It is commonly believed that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does not directly address racism. Even prominent critics of Twain's works have claimed that racism is not a central concern in the novel.

Before the emergence of deconstruction, all critical approaches implicitly agreed upon certain conventions or rules of literary interpretation. These methods assumed that literary texts possess stable meanings and that the role of criticism is to uncover those meanings. Deconstruction challenged these assumptions, which had been foundational to previous critical frameworks. Rather than attempting to replicate the author's intended meaning, deconstruction seeks to identify the text's "blind spots"—areas where the text contradicts itself or reveals unintended meanings. It aims to bring what is hidden to light. Moreover, concepts that philosophy typically takes for granted become the focus of critical scrutiny in Derridean deconstruction.

In contrast to previous studies of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this research aims to uncover the novel's racist implications. Ultimately, it proposes an alternative interpretation that diverges from more conventional readings, arguing that the novel contains multiple and contradictory meanings. Therefore, this study attempts to explore representations within Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that may suggest a racist perspective—although whether such a perspective can be definitively attributed to Twain remains indeterminable.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) occupies a complex and often contentious position within the American literary canon. Since its publication, the novel has elicited polarized responses, ranging from early condemnations of its vernacular style and perceived vulgarity to effusive praise by literary figures such as T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway, the latter famously claiming it as the origin of modern American literature (Messent, 1997, p. 103; Champion, 1991, p. xxi). Laurie Champion provides a comprehensive overview of this evolving critical reception, tracing the novel's fluctuating status—from celebrated literary innovation to a source of moral and pedagogical controversy—through successive waves of scholarly interpretation (Champion, 1991, p. xii).

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism has increasingly foregrounded the novel's treatment of race and its representational politics. Frances W. Kaye argues that Twain's narrative enables readers to engage with the ethical ambiguities of slavery and racial oppression only at a superficial level, arguing that the text "gives us no more of this reality than we can bear" (Kaye, 1999, p. 14). Echoing this critique, Elaine and Harry Mensh, in *Black, White, and Huckleberry Finn*, offer a systematic analysis of racial depictions within the novel, concluding that Twain's portrayal neither disrupts entrenched racial

ideologies nor offers a substantive critique of white supremacy; rather, it may tacitly reinforce prevailing prejudices (Mensch & Mensch, 2000, pp. 6–8).

Recent theoretical interventions, particularly those influenced by critical race theory and Afropessimism, have further interrogated the novel's structural limitations. Sebastian Rao, in his Afropessimist reading, argues that Twain's text remains ensnared in white narrative frameworks that inhibit authentic Black subjectivity. While acknowledging the novel's critique of racism, Rao asserts that its moral discourse remains fundamentally white-centered, thereby constraining its ability to fully represent or reckon with Black suffering (Rao, 2023, pp. 12–13). In contrast, Jocelyn Chadwick Joshua mounts a spirited defense of Twain's linguistic choices, particularly his deployment of vernacular and racially offensive language. She argues that these transgressive elements are central to the novel's disruptive force, resisting the impulse toward sanitization and preserving its critical edge (Chadwick Joshua, 1998, p. 89).

An intensified focus on the character of Jim has also reoriented recent scholarly discourse. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in *Jim: The Life and Afterlives of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade*, examines the historical and literary reception of Jim over more than a century, arguing that Twain's use of dialect was a deliberate and subversive strategy to humanize a Black character within a deeply racialized cultural context (Fishkin, 2024, p. 127). Fishkin's work foregrounds Jim not merely as a figure within the narrative but as a cultural symbol whose legacy continues to shape and inform debates on race, identity, and literary representation.

Together, these diverse critical engagements underscore the enduring relevance—and deep ambivalence—of *Huckleberry Finn* in American literary and cultural discourse. The novel persists as a contested site where questions of authorship, race, narrative ethics, and historical memory are continually negotiated and reinterpreted.

In his essay on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, titled "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn," Leo Marx argues that *Huckleberry Finn* did not originally occupy its current prestigious place in the American literary canon. T. S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling were two of the most influential critics whose praise helped elevate the novel to canonical status. However, Marx criticizes these critics for attempting to justify what he sees as the novel's disappointing ending. According to Marx, the meaning of Huck and Jim's journey is "not in the least obscure" (Marx, 1953, p. 425).

Marx asserts that it is due to Huck's "instinctive humanity" that he decides to help Jim escape slavery.

However, this study suggests that the meaning of the journey is ultimately indeterminable. Marx believes that Huck defies the values of the society he has absorbed from figures like Miss Watson. Yet there is evidence in the novel indicating that Huck's selfless decision was influenced by the moral guidance he received earlier from Widow Douglas—a character Marx does not even mention. Marx finds the ending disappointing because Jim is set free by Miss Watson. According to Marx, Miss Watson (Widow Douglas's sister) "exhibits all the outstanding traits of the valley society" and is, in short, "the Enemy" (Marx, 1953, p. 426).

Overall, this study challenges Marx's claim that the meaning of Huck and Jim's journey "is not in the least obscure" (Marx, 1953, p. 425). It argues that the novel, rather than presenting a single, coherent message, offers multiple, conflicting interpretations that resist closure.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, the researchers have employed a qualitative approach focused on Derrida's double reading as a deconstructive methodology. The material is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and the data analysis method is textual interpretation (close reading).

Jacques Derrida's notion of *double reading* constitutes a foundational methodological strategy within deconstructive criticism. This approach entails two interconnected yet distinct stages of textual interpretation. The initial reading engages with the text according to its apparent structural coherence and internal logic. In this phase, the critic adopts the interpretive framework the text offers, affirming its ostensible unity and the stability of its meaning. A second reading—guided by Derrida's deconstructive methodology—uncovers deeper contradictions that complicate the novel's apparent moral coherence.

IV. FINDINGS

However, a second reading—guided by Derrida's deconstructive methodology—uncovers deeper contradictions that complicate the novel's apparent moral coherence. Despite Huck's moments of compassion, he continues to refer to Jim in dehumanizing terms, employing racial slurs that reflect the enduring presence of racist ideology. For instance, Huck states, "He's just a nigger, and that's all there is to it" (Twain, 1885, p. 110), a remark that starkly illustrates the persistence of racial prejudice even within seemingly progressive moments. Furthermore, Jim is frequently depicted through reductive stereotypes—portrayed as superstitious, naive, and overly dependent—traits that align more closely with minstrel

caricatures than with the portrayal of a fully developed character. Thus, although the narrative appears to foster empathy, it simultaneously reinforces the very racial tropes it purports to critique.

The novel's ending further exposes the limitations of its critique. Jim's emancipation is not the result of a principled rejection of slavery or a transformative moral awakening, but rather the outcome of a narrative convenience—Miss Watson's death and her posthumous decision to free him. Huck, instead of engaging with or challenging the societal institutions he has come to question, opts for withdrawal:

"I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest" (Twain, 1885, p. 451).

This symbolic departure suggests not a genuine transformation, but evasion. As revealed through Derrida's framework, the narrative ultimately reverts to the status quo, leaving dominant social and racial hierarchies fundamentally unchallenged and its deeper ideological tensions unresolved.

V. DISCUSSION

Applying Derrida's deconstructive approach reveals deep moral contradictions in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that complicate its critique of racism and slavery. Although Huck shows some empathy toward Jim, his use of racial slurs and Jim's stereotypical portrayal undermine the novel's progressiveness, reflecting entrenched racist attitudes even in moments of compassion. Huck's ethical struggles further expose the limits of his moral growth, as his guilt centers on violating white property rights rather than recognizing slavery's injustice.

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In conclusion, Derrida's theory of double reading enables a more nuanced interpretation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, not merely as a critique of racism and moral hypocrisy, but as a profoundly ambivalent text that both contests and reinforces dominant ideological structures. While Twain offers moments of ethical reflection and social critique, these are frequently undermined by narrative choices and racial representations that complicate, if not contradict, the novel's emancipatory potential. Through this dual interpretive approach, readers gain a more comprehensive understanding of the novel's ethical and ideological complexity.

Jim's freedom, granted through narrative convenience, and Huck's symbolic withdrawal underscore the novel's failure to truly challenge racial hierarchies. Derrida's double reading thus offers a nuanced view of the text as an ambivalent work that both critiques and reinforces dominant ideologies, presenting readers with a complex ethical and ideological landscape rather than a clear moral resolution.

VI. CONCLUSION

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* occupies a contentious position within the American literary canon. While frequently lauded for its critique of slavery, the novel is equally implicated in perpetuating racial ideologies. Through the application of Jacques Derrida's theory of double reading, this analysis demonstrates how the text simultaneously constructs and dismantles its moral claims. The surface narrative, centered on Huck's apparent ethical development and his resistance to pro-slavery values, ostensibly positions the novel as an anti-racist work. However, a more rigorous deconstructive reading reveals significant ideological fractures that complicate this interpretation.

Central to these contradictions is the character of Jim, who functions both as a catalyst for Huck's moral evolution and as a figure shaped by persistent racial stereotyping. Although Jim plays a pivotal role in the narrative, he is seldom granted the interiority or narrative agency required to challenge the minstrel tropes that define his depiction. The disparity between the novel's ostensible empathy and its underlying complicity with racialized discourse undermines its claim to moral advancement. Huck's ongoing use of racial slurs and his failure to interrogate the legitimacy of slavery further underscore the limitations of his ethical maturation and, by extension, the novel's critical reach.

These limitations are further exemplified in the novel's conclusion. Jim's liberation arises not from a systemic or moral transformation, but from a narrative convenience—Miss Watson's death and her posthumous manumission of Jim. Huck's decision to retreat to the frontier symbolizes not resistance, but evasion of the very social order he briefly seemed to question. Rather than challenging the ideological foundations of racial oppression, the narrative ultimately reinstates them. As Derrida's framework reveals, this return to the status quo is not an incidental narrative failure but a structural component of the text's ideological operation.

In sum, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* emerges as a profoundly ambivalent text—one that aspires to critique institutional injustice while remaining enmeshed in the

cultural ideologies it ostensibly seeks to subvert. Derrida's theory of double reading facilitates a more nuanced critical engagement with the novel's ethical and ideological tensions. This interpretive approach does not diminish the novel's literary significance; rather, it situates the text within a broader conversation about literature's capacity to both reflect and reinforce dominant cultural values. Attending to these internal contradictions allow for a deeper understanding of the possibilities and constraints of moral representation within the American literary tradition.

Therefore, whether consciously or unconsciously, Twain's portrayal of certain characters in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reveals racial biases, indicating an element of racism in his characterization. Nevertheless, the novel's overarching thematic concern remains an anti-slavery critique.

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